

## Museums, Gender and Culture

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**Received :** 22 January 2024 • **Revised :** 24 February 2024 • **Accepted :** 05 March 2024 • **Published :** 29 June 2024

### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Supreo Chanda, Indrani Bhattacharya & Lyric Banerjee 2024. Museums, Gender and Culture. *Journal of Historical, Archaeological and Anthropological Studies*, 2: 1, pp. 17-24.

**Abstract:** Though culture should not have any gender bias, it is often witnessed that culture does have gender association imbibed within it. Museum, a social institution by default, being the custodian of the relics of cultural heritage also reflects the gender discrimination prevailing in the society. This paper tries to illustrate, in brief, the gender leniency in cultural diversity with examples from the museum collections. In the process, the paper deals with the gamut of the issues of historical perspectives of women's rights concerning culture and cultural practices, gender perception in the collection process, the role of women in the museums, etc. A few suggestions are also forwarded for correcting the gender balance. An exhaustive bibliography has also been provided at the end.

**Keywords:** Museum, Museology, Material Culture, Cultural Diversity, Human Right Instruments, Gender & Culture.

## Introduction

Being a vast topic, it is very difficult to do complete justice within limited words, however, we shall try to be brief and to the point. One may wonder how the museum is related to such a **specialized subject**. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) *adopted in their Extraordinary General Assembly held at Prague, Czech Republic, on 24 August 2022, the definition of a museum as*, A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.

Naturally museum is a public institution quite relevant to contemporary social issues. Museology being *the philosophy of visual interpretation of heritage* (Chanda, 2008: 25), including the cultural one, is also relevant to ponder upon the burning issues like gender and culture. Material culture, commonly described as the object produced by human beings, including buildings, structures, monuments, tools, weapons, utensils, furniture, art, and indeed any physical item created by a society, which is often displayed in the museums testify to the fact that material cultural has a close relation to gender.

### Cultural Diversity

In the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity 2001, UNESCO defines Culture as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, and intellectual features of a society/social group. Culture, as commonly understood is a complex whole including knowledge, belief, morals, arts and all other capabilities and habits acquired by a social being – and more precisely it is the radiation of the society. It is derived from anthropology and sociology. Culture, therefore is not supposed to have any specific gender relation. But inequality in the enjoyment of human rights by women throughout the world is very often reflected in tradition, history and culture as a whole. Cultural Diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups & societies making up humankind. Discrimination against women is very often reflected in culture. Tripp (2001:416) states, “Cultural rationales are used throughout the world to protect the status quo when it comes to advancing women’s rights even in the United States, which is a democratic country, culture features prominently in arguments against improving women’s rights.”

Women’s bodies are abused in the name of culture by some practices such as foot binding, forced veiling, genital mutilation and *honour killings*. On the pretext of social and cultural background female circumcision (female genital mutilation, FMG) is always kept aside as a matter of too much sensational phenomenon. Even the cultural intellectuals this way or that way virtually challenge the authority of the international institutions on this issue. In her book, *Women and Human Rights*, Tomasovski (1993:84) writes, “Getting the United Nations and its specialized agencies, notable WHO, to address the genital mutilation of women was neither easy nor quick.” In one culture, girls’ bodies are spontaneously fattened before marriage and in another culture, girls are willing to strive to form a thin female figure.

### International Human Rights Instruments

The Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR), 1948; the International Covenant on Economics Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), 1966; and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), 1966, are the three international human rights instruments, which are referred by the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The three instruments include the principle of non-discrimination based on gender as a core and primary requirement. Here it must be mentioned of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) that was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 18, 1979. Among the international human rights treaties, this Convention takes an important place in bringing the female half of humanity into the focus of human rights concerns. First, CEDAW enumerates the legal status of women and focuses on several particular rights, including political representation, education, employment and civil and business matters, among others. Second, it explicitly addresses reproductive rights. Finally, it focuses on culture and women’s human rights. The goal of the CEDAW was to provide women’s rights in the context of cultural/ traditional patterns.

Until the 1990s, discussions of human rights focused on torture genocide and other extreme forms of abuse. The term, *human rights*, generally refers to violations of people's bodily integrity by agents of the state. But women grassroots activists include under the rubric of *human rights* opposition to various forms of violence, including economic and social inequalities against which activists have increasingly been struggling. Through the active participants at the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993) and the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) the slogan **women's rights are human rights** came to be internationalized. The Beijing Conference marked a turning point. It brought the world's women together beyond nationalism to formulate an international agenda. Since in the decades of 1990 activists have embarked on a mission to create a new global community, and the notion of women's rights as human rights is intrinsic to it.

## Gender and Culture

In December 2003, UNESCO held an expert meeting on *Gender and Intangible Cultural Heritage*, which published a Final Report that clearly states that there is a clear need to pay special attention to gender equality in the context of safeguarding intangible cultures. The report suggests, "Women custodians and researchers should be involved in identifying and documenting intangible cultural heritage, as well as in designing policies for the safeguarding of such heritage."

One of the participants, Neila Das, raised the question of *political recognition of gender issues in the act of preservation of intangible cultural heritage*. A well-accepted recommendation was "Any element of this heritage that may seem to reflect gender inequality should be evaluated as a part of cultural cannon which, as a whole, may transmit an overall gender balance."

The Social and Human Sciences Sector (SHS) of the UNESCO recommends following measures as indicators of women's cultural participation and rights:

1. Tertiary students in fine arts and humanities as a percentage of all tertiary students and a percentage of women.
2. Percentage of Female Museum staff.
3. Percentage of female Ministry of Culture decision-making staff.
4. Number and type of women's organisations devoted to cultural issues.
5. Number and type of print and electronic media owned or managed by women devoted to cultural issues.

Using the above indicators, Valentine M Moghadam and Lucie Senftova developed a set of indicators that measure women's empowerment in civil, political, economic, social and cultural domains. A similar set of indicators has to be developed and followed to ascertain the extent of gender bias of culture, especially that of ours. Only then the gender equality in a broader perspective be achieved.

In the Final Report, one of the experts said that storytelling is broadly regarded as a feminine practice and therefore marginalized. In our society, a few people seriously contradict a widely accepted apprehension: that beauty or allure becomes a woman, whereas virility becomes a man. A general perception is gender can be linked to the collecting process through the gendered meaning of collecting and through the gender association of the objects collected; and through the gendered use of collections. In the case of extended self-collections, it follows that they must have the capacity to

take on a male or female identity: collectors and collectable objects are all potentially gendered (Belk and Wallendorf, 1992). Women are buyers for sheer joy, and buy to decorate; while men are collectors; men's collections are serious and creative; men have a vision for collections.

### **Museum, Collection and Gender**

Collection is one of the central activities of a museum. But there are some reasons why people as well as museum professionals collect. The reasons of collecting include psychological and social intention. We may use two examples in this respect, such as the collection of toy cars is very popular among the boys and the collection of dolls is very much prevalent among the girls. These two examples prove that collection depends on the nature of collectors. In 1931, Witty observed that American girls were more eager to collect flowers, jewellery, pictures, dolls, personal items like souvenirs, etc. On the other hand, boys were more likely to acquire animal and insect parts, objects related to fighting and hunting, game objects like kites, and marbles, and repair and maintenance materials, like padlocks, oil cans, nails, etc. These reasons for the collection create a plot of feminine and masculine images and characters. Rigby and Rigby (1944: 326-7) appropriately stated "Grand-scale collecting almost always calls for aggressive and material ambition to a degree uncharacteristic of women, aside from women's historic economic position. Those who came within hailing distance of collecting giants were women who seemed to exhibit the masculine strain of a highly developed competitiveness, although this in no way detracts from the position of women as amateurs".

The process of collecting materials by two different museum professionals, male and female, will reflect similar stereotypes, and will themselves be seen as gender-related collections. Saisselin (1984: 68) comments that "Women were consumers of objects; men were collectors." It is a very important comment concerning gender biases in the collection. This is not surprising, because museums are the custodians of our culture and they are mirrors of our society too. Pearce (1992) has rightly opined that "Gender itself constructed through collecting and collections as it is through everything else, for material culture has here, as everywhere, an active as well as a passive stance. Collecting does its share to create the gender distinctions which govern social life."

Levin (2010: 2) points out in the Introduction of her edited book *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, "An indicator of the importance of gender in museums at the beginning of the twentieth century and images of women on display within is the fact that in 1913 and 1914 members of the women's suffrage movement launched attacks on several museums".

Now few visuals should be cited in support of our contention. Given below are two photographs (Fig. 1) of sculptures from the display of the Salarjung Museum, Hyderabad. These are regarded as precious art objects. Did one ever give a thought over why only the female nudes are mostly exposed as art objects? Why male nudes are comparatively fewer in number? Are we pretending to pass off sex objects as art objects?

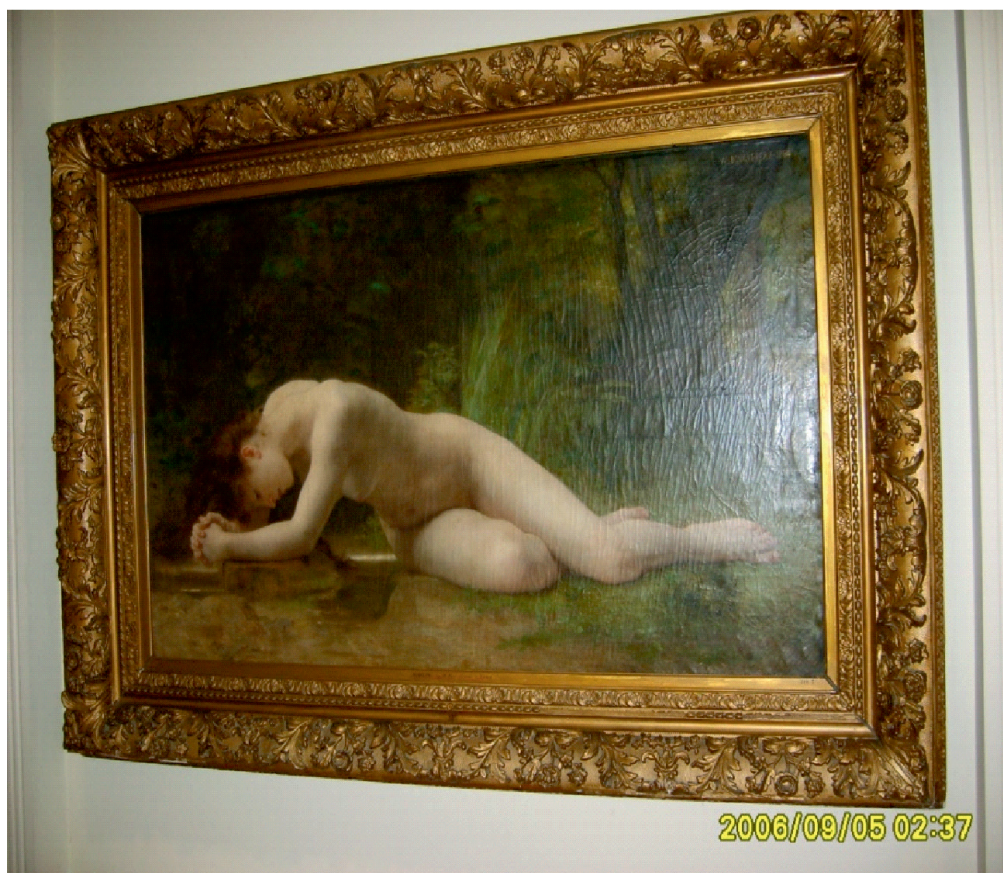
We know, by now, many would start arguing that these are highly aesthetic and why should one object to showing these? Are not the concepts of art, aesthetics, etc. apparent and social constructs varying from culture to culture? Can one say, for sure that these are equally enjoyed by the women? We may cite another example.

Perhaps she (Fig. 3) is the most famous lady on the earth! But where are the dancing postures? Isn't she look like a common lady, may be of a primitive society, taking a breath between very hard back-breaking menial jobs? Is there any scope for romanticizing or glorification?





**Fig. 1: Sculptures from the European Marble Gallery, Salarjung Museum, Hyderabad Let us see another photograph (Fig. 2) from the painting gallery of the same museum.**



**Fig. 2: Painting from the display of the Salarjung Museum, Hyderabad**

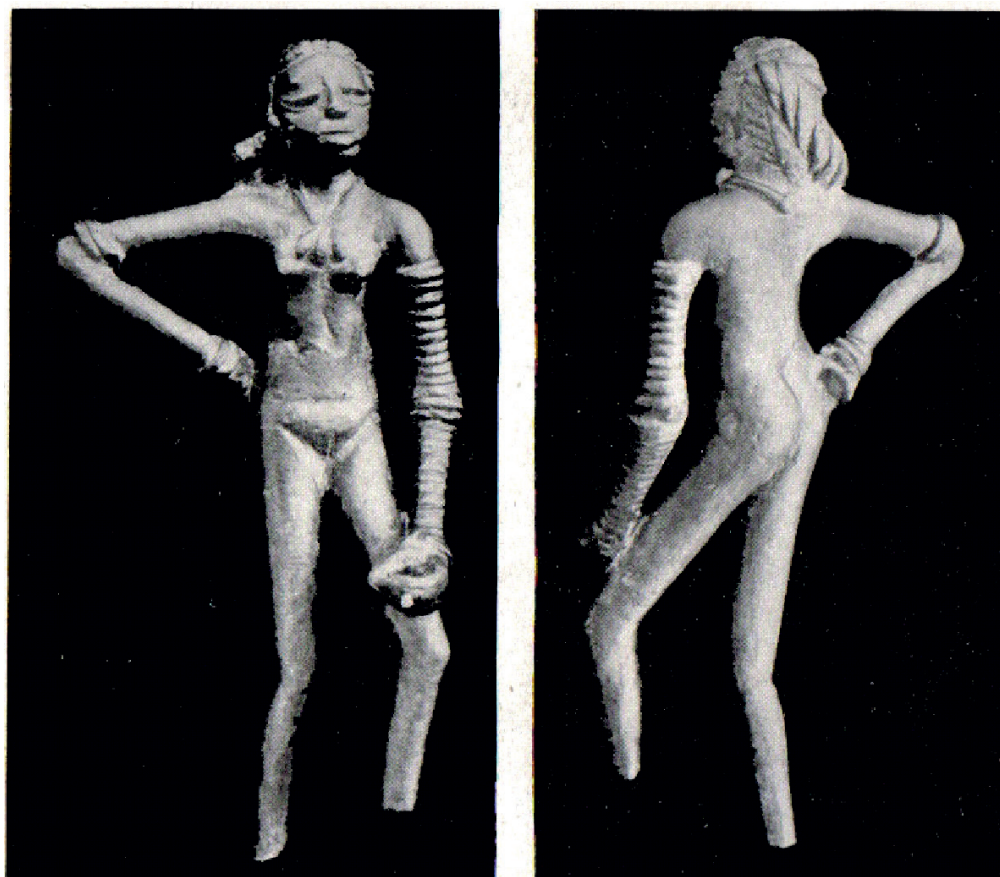


Fig. 3: The Dancing Girl of Mohenjo-Daro, National Museum, New Delhi.

## Museum and Women

Hein (2010: 530) provides an interesting insight into the outlook of the museums for women, “Consider The Smithsonian Institution: founded with a half-million dollar bequest to the United States in 1829, by James Smithson, whose ghost still allegedly haunts the institution, and endowed in the city of Washington “for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.”

Levin (2010: 201) observes, quite correctly though, that the displays essentially on subjects of hard science are no exception, “Museum exhibits on human evolution and earth history are gendered in strange and complicated ways, too, which reveal social anxieties about sex and sexuality while policing gender norms.”

Women are the major contributors to museum collections. Many of the art and craft collections in the museums are solely produced by the womenfolk. Women are repositories of several traditional cultural heritage. Women are the primary source of moral and value education for the children. The traditional wisdom borne by the women must be properly and scientifically documented immediately to save them from extinction. Hoards of elements of cultural heritage, especially the oral traditions are still being carried by the women. Museums are the most perfect agencies for taking up research to document, preserve and revive such a rich repository of cultural heritage. There has been a complete vacuum in the database on the number of women visitors in the museums, the likes & dislikes, expectations, aspirations & desires of the women museum visitors, exhibitions relating to women issues, the role of women in museum management, the contributions of women in the collections



that are possessed by the museums, etc. Women museum visitors, especially in India seldom visit museums of their own volition, whether they are accompaniments to their parents or husbands or kids as part of their educational needs. What an identity crisis! Most of the museums do not maintain any records on the women visitors. We do have few statistical figures to establish that not many women are engaged in serving museums in responsible capacities. Only a few women museum employees could go up to higher posts like Director in the museums (particularly in India).

Museum staffing is not the only domain in which gender comes into play. When contemporary museums attempt to focus on marginalized populations, their exhibitions gain inflexion from three inextricable and commanding forces: the institution's past and present relationship to dominant groups; the politics of control inherent in spectatorship and display; and the evolving economics of marketing culture, and especially sex, as a commodity (Levin, 2010: 5-6).

## Conclusion

One may go on criticizing or fault-finding in the system endlessly. But what is the way out then? To us, the following actions may improve the situation:

1. Immediate research by all leading museums to ascertain the exact numbers of women visitors, their choices, dislikes, aspirations, etc.
2. Close cooperation between the museums and university Museology departments to ensure effective research.
3. Efforts to know why women do not visit museums more in numbers.
4. More chances for women museologists in museum services, especially in the policy-making capacities.
5. Adequate involvement of women at the advisory bodies of the museums.
6. Involving women in resource development, particularly in the preparation of exhibitions and giving them operational responsibilities for the programmes arranged by the museums.
7. Museums' leading roles in increasing awareness regarding women's status in society and in asserting their voice more prominently and effectively in all decision-making.

Equality is a right and museums must recognise the importance to accord equality of rights to women.

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